

Unsung Heroes of Faith

“Shiphrah and Puah”

Exodus 1:15-22

For the last two weeks, we have reflected on the stories of three unsung heroes: the Widow of Zarephath whose radical hospitality saved and preserved the life of the prophet Elijah during a time of drought and famine, and the two craftsmen, Bezalel and Oholiab who used their gifts and skills to build the tabernacle, the portable place of worship the Israelites used until the construction of the Jerusalem Temple. Today, we are going to consider the story of Shiphrah and Puah.

The book of Exodus tells us the story of the formation of the community of God’s people, and Moses is the central figure in it. But, the story of Moses would not have been possible without the story of the midwives. Of course, there were other important women who were unsung heroes in Moses’ life: his mother, Jochebed, who risked her own life to save his life by building a basket for him; his older sister, Miriam, who watched her baby brother as he was in the basket; and the Pharaoh’s daughter, who found Moses in the basket by the banks of the Nile River and adopted him, disobeying her father’s order. But, their stories would not have existed without the courageous actions of Shiphrah and Puah.

Let me give you a brief background for today’s scripture reading, as recorded in the beginning of the book of Exodus. Jacob, the grandson of Abraham, and his whole household, his 12 sons and their families, 70 in total, had migrated from Canaan to Egypt during a time of drought and famine and settled down there. As many years passed by, the first generation of immigrants all died, but their descendants multiplied in number.

Then, the Egyptians began to resent their growing population and prosperity. Their king said to his people, *“Look the Israelites have become much too numerous for us. Come we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country.”* So, the king enslaved the Israelites.

“But, the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread” (Ex. 1:12). So, the Pharaoh, the king of Egypt took a more drastic measure and ordered genocide. He summoned two Hebrew midwives, Shiphrah and Puah and told them, “When you help the Hebrew women in childbirth and observe them on the delivery stool, if it is a boy, kill him; but if it is a girl, let her live.”

Of course, Shiphrah and Puah were not the only midwives for the Israelites. Most likely, they were the chief midwives who supervised other midwives. And, apparently, the Pharaoh wanted them to carry out his command in secret, killing the babies without the knowledge of their mothers. But, the scripture says the midwives feared God and did not do as the king had told them to do. Instead, they let the Hebrew boys live!

We know it’s not easy to go against any established order, whether it is political, economic, or social. And imagine how scary it must have been for the powerless women to defy the order they received directly from their powerful king. But, after all, they were midwives. Their primary task was to safely deliver

babies. No matter what the reason or the circumstances, killing a baby that they had just delivered would mean denying their own identity as life-bringer. It would mean abandoning their own responsibility as life-giver.

They knew what the right thing to do was in that situation. They knew they had to live out what they believed, no matter how hard it was. So, at great risk to their own lives, leaving their fate in the hands of the ruthless Egyptian king, they resisted his order of genocide. They refused to give in to the political pressure of the Egyptian authorities and said, “No” to the evil scheme of the Egyptian king.

On December 1, 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks said “No,” refusing to obey the bus driver’s order to give up her seat for a white passenger. Segregation was legal everywhere, even on a bus. The front section of the bus was reserved for white citizens, and the back for black citizens. And the bus driver had the authority to ask a black passenger to give up a seat for a white passenger.

Noticing a white man was standing because all the seats in the white-only section were taken, the bus driver asked people in the first row of the so-called “colored section” to give up their seats. There were 4 seats in each row. Three people complied but Parks did not. The driver demanded, “Why don’t you stand up?” Parks replied, “I don’t think I should have to stand up.” So, police officers were called in and Parks was arrested.

Her defiance sparked the famous Montgomery Bus Boycott. The boycott became very successful and started a nationwide effort to end racial segregation of public facilities. On November 13, the following year, the U.S. Supreme Court finally declared segregation on public transport to be unconstitutional.

Later, about her act of civil disobedience, Parks said, *“People always say that I didn’t give up my seat because I was tired ... the only tired I was, was tired of giving in.” “I knew someone had to take the first step and I made up my mind not to move.”*

God uses people like Shiphrah and Puah, and Rosa Parks, and even you and me, to bring God’s justice to an unjust situation and to correct the wrong. Our simple “no” can make a world of difference.

Going back to our text, how were the midwives able to stand against the command of the Pharaoh? We are told that they feared God and did not do what the Pharaoh had told them to do. The source of their courage was that they feared God. Here, the fear of God does not mean that you are afraid of God because God will punish you for your sins. Instead, the fear of God is a deep sense of awe. It is an awareness that the ultimate source of power comes from God who created heaven and earth. Fearing God means respecting God for God’s mystery and wonder. Fearing God means desiring God’s holy presence. So, the fear of God draws us closer to the holy instead of pushing us away. Drawing their courage from God almighty, Shiphrah and Puah stood against the evil power of the Pharaoh.

And perhaps, Shiphrah and Puah were able to do so because they were together. They did not work alone but in partnership. The Pharaoh summoned them twice, and both times, they went together. They worked together, helping women safely deliver their babies. To resist the Pharaoh’s evil decree, they worked together and came up with a clever lie. In other words, they conspired against the Pharaoh. The word, conspire has two words, *con* which means together, and *spire* which means to breathe. To conspire means to breathe together. Shiphrah and Puah, whose roles were to help mothers who were giving birth with their

breathing, kept breathing together with them. The midwives made secret plans to disobey the command of the king and save the babies.

The Pharaoh received a report that Hebrew boys were still around despite his order of genocide. So, he brought back Shiphrah and Puah to his palace for questioning. He asked them, "*Why have you let the boys live?*" Their answer was, "*Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women. They are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive.*" There may have been partial truth in their answer, but, apparently, it was a lie that they could never arrive in time to kill the babies. But, God did not find fault with them, but rather rewarded them for risking their own lives to save the lives of the Hebrew babies.

My friends, whether we come together for worship or fellowship, learning or serving, may our time together be a time to breathe together. May we breathe in the breath of God, who is the creator and giver of life. Shiphrah and Puah, the midwives, through their courage, saved the Hebrew babies from death, and in doing so, secured the life of Moses.

How is God calling us to be midwives in our context? What is the "no" to the powers of the world that God seeks from us? Because God invites us. Just as God invited the other unsung heroes into God's story, God invites us to have a role. We are called to speak the language of life and to be God's assistant in creating more lives in the world. In the face of death and destruction, God calls us to take a risk and say "*yes.*" A "*yes*" to help build the vision of God's kingdom here on Earth. A "*yes*" to a new creation, which is taking shape, a place where there is justice, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.
Thanks be to God! Amen.